

## **Building collaborative networks for improving student teachers practice**

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Paper presented at the 19th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 2006.

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### **Introduction**

In the last few decades many European countries have made intercultural education a very high priority for their educational systems. The increasingly heterogeneous mix of the populations from vastly different countries, with different ethnicities, has led to increasing interest in education to keep up with the contemporary needs of modern multicultural pluralistic societies. Immigrants, foreign workers and asylum seekers have come to be added to the once relatively homogeneous populations of many European countries.

There is a similar situation in Cyprus but the issue of multicultural pluralism in Cypriot society appeared for discussion only within the last decade or so. The state system, and generally the society, have been caught unprepared for this social trend and so situations of racism and xenophobia have appeared (see, Tharros, 1998; Pissas, 1998; Romanos, 1998). Cypriot education (obviously as a social system) was equally unprepared as well, and seemed to have difficulties accepting children who came from different countries and spoke different languages to that of the dominant culture's children. As a result, teachers did not know how to respond and many children were marginalized (see, Angelides & Stylianou, 2001; 2003; Angelides, Stylianou & Leigh, 2003).

During the last few years there have been efforts from within the educational system of Cyprus to develop policy and practice on intercultural education (see, Ministry of Education and Culture, 2002), however, it seems that there is a widespread dissatisfaction not only among teachers and parents, but also among researchers for the implementation of intercultural education (see, Angelides, Stylianou & Leigh, 2003; 2004). Many researchers suggest that intercultural education should start from the initial training of teachers (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1995). Thus, in this paper I present the implementation of a collaborative research project where I (with a research team) built a collaborative network through which I tried to help student teachers develop intercultural practices.

At the beginning, I briefly examine the status quo prevailing today in Cyprus regarding teacher education, and study more generally teacher education in relation to intercultural education. After this, I explain the term 'collaborative networks' and then I analyze the methodology I used for completing the research that led to this paper. Finally, I present and substantiate with data, the dominant themes that arose from my analysis.

### **Teacher education in Cyprus**

Teacher education in Cyprus constitutes part of higher education despite the fact that some teachers (mainly Cypriots who have studies abroad) graduate from universities in other countries (mainly from Greece and Great Britain). There are four institutions (three private and one public) that train teachers, with the state University of Cyprus producing the most graduates that work in public schools (because until 2000 the degrees of private higher education institutions were not recognized by the government). The vast majority of teachers, until recently, come from the cultural environment of Cyprus. These teachers have few experiences which would help them to adjust to a pluralist multiethnic society and the concomitant educational system's needs.

Despite the fact that the Ministry of Education has formally declared that teachers should be able to teach in multicultural classes and be educationally and experientially prepared to do so

(Ministry of Education and Culture, 2002; 1996), this has not been followed up with the required development of teachers' skills which would offer to all children a safe learning environment to prepare these fledgling citizens to become adult citizens of a multicultural society. The Ministry has not made it clear what intercultural knowledge and attitudes teachers should have to succeed in this new educational arena.

From a study of the curriculum of the four higher education institutions which train teachers, not one has a course titled 'intercultural education'. It seems that teachers in their initial education are not formally or systematically taught issues of intercultural education, although this may happen incidentally in different courses, usually from the initiative of lecturers (see, Angelides & Stylianou, 2004).

### **Intercultural education and teacher education**

The dearth of efforts for providing progressive intercultural education for all children, regardless of their language and ethnicity, has highlighted the vital issue of initial and in-service continuing education of teachers (Council of Europe, 1986). Of course, it would be senseless to mount efforts for introducing intercultural education in primary and secondary education, when the teachers who teach in these schools are not educated in intercultural education methodologies or in an intercultural environment in higher education.

A number of researchers who deal with intercultural education suggest the training of teachers must address issues of cultural diversity and racism. Also teacher training must include courses that are related to intercultural education and the respect of other cultures (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1995; 2000; 2001; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Leigh & Ktoridou (2001) argue that intercultural education should build curriculum in a way that not only teachers, but also

students [and pupils] will be aided to develop tolerance and flexibility to operate in the ethnic and cultural mix of the modern world, without being threatened or prejudiced, in a negative way, towards people of different cultures (p. 178).

This is all well and good, but the problem in Cyprus is that many people understand intercultural education in higher education to be a series of lecture-lessons or seminars of in-service education.

However, research shows that these lecture-lessons and seminars may only influence the attitudes of teachers but not their practice (Sleeter, 1992). The provision of only information related to intercultural education is not enough. Christine Sleeter (1992) found that the teachers who completed her intercultural education course showed changes in their beliefs regarding diversity, justice and difference, but these changes were not transferred or evident in their subsequent teaching.

Based on this finding, I present in this paper, the implementation of a project of a collaborative network of student teachers for the purpose of developing intercultural practices through collaboration, dialogue and reflection. The traditional model of teacher education in which teachers are taught a certain theory and then trained in the corresponding practical competences, is no longer adequate (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Many researchers argue that to be an effective teacher in intercultural education presupposes one to be a reflective teacher (e.g. Hoffman, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These teachers should be able to reflect on the relation between their teaching and the wider social, economic, cultural and political context in which they function (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Grant & Tate, 1995). In other words, they should be able, as reflective practitioners, to reflect and take into account the social and political implications of their activities in the classroom. Student teachers should experience social and ethnic diversity by doing their practical training in schools with heterogeneous populations, or even by living and teaching in areas where the ethno-political environment is different than their own (Causey, Thomas &

Armento, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). In addition, the practical training of teachers should be directly connected with self-critical reflection, and a critical approaches to all levels of education whether giving or receiving advice (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

### **Collaborative networks-Communities of practice**

Based on the above analysis, I will, in this paper, present a research project where I and my colleagues tried to cultivate intercultural education ideas and skills in student teachers by building a 'collaborative network' in which student teachers had the chance to organize their lessons collaboratively, to receive feedback from their classmates, to teach these lessons, to self-reflect on their lessons, and to listen to the critical comments of their student colleagues and their educators.

Hopkins (2002) argues that building collaborative networks in higher education can constitute a significant factor to bring about change and improvement. In particular, as Hopkins notes, collaborative networks have the potential to provide the focal point for the dissemination of good practice. In addition, Hopkins continues, these collaborative networks help in the generalizability of innovation and the creation of 'action-oriented' knowledge of effective educational practices.

Networking is often used to describe a process in which two or more people communicate back and forth with each other (Clark, 1998). By combining their efforts, network members are able to have a greater impact on policy and practice than they would have alone (Allee, 2000). According to Clark (2000)

the network exists for the purpose of creating and disseminating new knowledge; it does not exist just to provide access to existing knowledge ... the network is structured and operates so as to maximize the rate at which new knowledge is discovered ... the network must provide clear, recognizable and direct benefits to all participants in the network (p. 11).

At the heart of a network are people working together. Ideas are generated and activities are implemented. Learning is documented and shared to spark new ideas and to begin the cycle over again. However, these processes, Creech and Willard (2001) argue, do not occur automatically. Networks, they contend, can cause frustration and undercut the feelings of mutual admiration and appreciation that may have attracted members in the first place. Joining a network entails a long commitment to collaborative effort. In order for a network to exist at all, Creech and Willard conclude, careful attention must be given to how members will be managed.

Collaborative networks are directly related to communities of practice. Wenger (1998) claims the following about institutions, and higher education institutions in particular:

to the extent that they address issues of learning explicitly, are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching (p. 3).

Wenger makes this comment in order to subsequently argue that learning is a social phenomenon and that it is achieved better when there is social participation and in particular when there is participation in communities of practice. Knowledge, for Wenger, is inseparable from practice, and it is integrated into the life of the community of practice where members share values, beliefs, language and the way they do things.

Communities of practice are groups of people who share what they know, learn from each other regarding issues of their work and provide a social context for this work. For Wenger (1998), communities of practice develop around things that are important to the people involved. The fact that these committees are organized around a certain area of knowledge

and activity, Wenger continues, gives their members a feeling of a common enterprise and identity. In order to function, a community of practice needs to produce and assimilate a common repertoire of ideas, obligations and memories. Moreover, as Wenger points out, the community of practice needs to develop certain resources like tools, routines, vocabulary, and symbols, which carry, in a way, the accumulated knowledge of the community. In other words, the community of practice includes practice. That is, in the community of practice, the ways in which members do or approach something, are common to a significant degree among the members.

The members of a community of practice are virtually connected in a collaborative network where they interact, reflect and have common experiences, aimed towards a common purpose.

### **Methodology**

The research project in this paper took place in the School of Education of Intercollege, the largest higher education institution of Cyprus. All the data was collected from the department of practical training, which is coordinated by me. All the participants were female student teachers in pre-primary school education.

Based on theoretical analysis of certain aspects of their teacher training, in the first stage I began to systematically observe the third and fourth year student teachers (assuming they had developed their practice better in comparison with first and second year student teachers) trying to spot practices related to equity, social justice, racism, cultural pluralism, difference and generally to issues that were related to intercultural education. My aim was to study our student teachers' practice regarding intercultural education, given that they had attended a series of lessons through which, among other themes, intercultural education was elaborated on (although none of those had intercultural education as an exclusive subject of study).

Besides the observation and evaluation of their lessons (given during practice teaching) by the members of the department of practical training, all student teachers had to submit, as a part of their assessment, a portfolio which included fifteen lesson plans in different subjects. For every lesson plan they put into practice, student teachers had to write a page of critical reflection on that lesson, with their comments on certain issues I gave them in advance (for example, achievement of their aims, changes they would do if they were re-teach that lesson, the provision of equal opportunities to all children). It was actually a reflection of the lesson they taught (Schon, 1983). All portfolios were studied carefully, paying particular attention to those critical reflections that were related to the lessons I had observed practices related to intercultural education.

In this way, I understood better the practices of our student teachers and their needs for improvement, all in terms of intercultural education. My main finding, up to this point of the project, was that our student teachers had many shortcomings in implementing intercultural practices. It was a finding that would seem to echo Sleeter's (1992) finding that lecture-lessons may change teachers' attitudes, but they have no impact on their practice.

Thus, I decided to involve a group of student teachers in a collaborative network where they could work collaboratively (with the department of practical training and their student colleagues) for the purpose of developing better intercultural practices. I chose twenty student teachers, to constitute the collaborative network. Student teachers were selected on the basis of their interest to participate in the project, upon the acceptance of both the head teacher of the school and the teacher of the classroom. This made it possible for the research to take place in their schools (only schools with a heterogeneous student population were selected).

I first informed our student teachers about the purposes of the project, and provided them with a short review of the basic notions of intercultural education that they had already been taught in the lecture-lessons they had taken. Then, the twenty student teachers were divided into

groups of four with only one criterion that they were in the same or a neighbouring school so they would be able to meet easily.

The obligations of the student teachers were, in the twelve weeks of the practical training, to organize individually or in groups, lessons or activities that, among other things, would cultivate notions related to intercultural education and better communication with children who did not speak Greek. They would include all the lesson plans, they considered related to intercultural education, in their portfolio that would later be submitted to the department of practical training, along with their self-reflection, as had been previously submitted by the student teachers in the first part of the project. In addition, in couples they should exchange two visits, namely to observe a colleague student during her teaching, to discuss with her the different practices observed, to tape-record the discussion and then to transcribe it. In addition to their observations from the two lessons observed, they were also to submit the two transcribed discussions, to be included in the portfolio, which they would all submit at the end of their practical training.

I and my colleagues visited each student teacher four times and observed four lessons that we knew in advance were related to intercultural education. After each lesson we observed and discussed with the student teacher involved, the results of her lesson and the practices she had used. For every lesson we filled in a form of evaluation in which we recorded the lesson characteristics, its strong and weak points, and the suggestions made to the student teacher.

The organization of the lessons and activities were made collaboratively. Every group of four student teachers had to meet twice per week, for around an hour, where they exchanged ideas for the organization and the implementation of their lessons. Every Friday there was a general meeting at the university which all twenty student teachers attended, in my presence, and they shared their experiences with their student colleagues. In particular, they presented the activities they used, we discussed them, they asked for feedback for other activities they planned to do, we discussed problems and controversial issues, and they exchanged materials and visual aids with each other. After these meetings I kept a diary in which I recorded the main points of the meetings as well as thoughts, ideas, and worries I had during the project. Generally, in these meetings, that usually lasted for around two hours, 'networking' among the student teachers was maintained and enhanced by them.

Data collection and analysis in qualitative research has two parallel and inseparable processes (see, Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reason I separate them is to help readers understand our way of working. Thus, the process of data analysis began from the first day of my involvement in this research. I was looking for repeated patterns, and for these patterns I collected further data. All together I developed sub-categories that I tried to support with the observations and data gathered. Finally, by analysing all of the data, some new interesting and more general themes arose. These themes became my major categories, which were based on our data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Developing intercultural practices**

By analyzing the data, a series of ideas related to the ways in which intercultural practices might be developed repeatedly appeared. These ideas, however, were overlapped, interconnected, interrelated, and were difficult to separate. However, I have arbitrarily separated them in a way that can be readily understood and therefore justified by the reader.

### **Networking communities of practice**

My analysis showed that our student teachers showed more interest in ways of learning that involved interaction. It seemed that the creation of the collaborative network, which functioned at three levels (couples, groups of four, and all together) had a positive impact on the development of intercultural practices. These practices were noticed in the student

teachers' lessons we observed, and also the student teachers themselves were aware of their changing practices, and many of them recorded it in their critical reflections.

By working with our student teachers, I realized first hand that various improvements were taking place through the collaborative network. The student teachers who belonged to the networked seemed to develop a particular interest in issues of intercultural education. After the first recommendations I made regarding ways of involving their pupils in intercultural matters, most of them took the initiative, by themselves, to develop a particular interest in the issue – and it was a surprise, as I had not expected such a high degree of initiative and interest in the area.

The student teachers searched in libraries and bookshops and found fairy tales and short texts, and by teaching from them, they hoped interculturalism could be cultivated in the classes. Furthermore, the student teachers organized creative activities, prepared visual aids and brought all these and shared them with their other student colleagues. They also asked on a daily basis through telephone, my (and other colleagues') views on the lessons they prepared, and generally they showed a degree of dedication to the subject that was very pleasantly surprising for us.

This dedication became even more intense when almost all the student teachers of the collaborative network began approaching our team to tell us that they wanted to do their final year project on a subject related to intercultural education. They seemed to love the theme; it was clear that they had continually learned; they wanted to continue learning and appeared impressed by the collaboration in the network and the results of their teaching, in an issue that it was actually novel but very relevant for them. A student teacher told me, for example:

When we began this collaboration I was not particularly happy nor I expected too much ... in the process I discovered that this issue is very interesting, it attracted me, I wanted to learn more ... because the issue was novel for me. In the lessons we did, we learned very little about intercultural education and we almost did nothing on practical issues ... I gained all these together from the collaboration with my colleagues and the department of practical training ... I understood the value of this matter and I believe that I can offer many things to children ... not only knowledge wise but for cultivating better individuals and to created responsible citizens that will be able to live in peace.

The collaborative network seemed to create the epicentre through which good and successful practices were disseminated as well as the place in which the different problems and anxieties of student teachers were discussed. Actually, this collaborative network produced knowledge that was based on action and would lead to further action.

For example, a student teacher prepared an activity that included pictures of different people from various countries around the world (i.e. Russian, Arab, Chinese, Greek, etc). Other cards, with texts written in the different people's respective languages (and alphabets), were also prepared. The children were asked to match the picture of each individual with its language. However, as children did not know, of course, how to read the different languages, on top of each of the pictures only a phrase had been placed, extracted from the appropriate text on the other cards. This prompt on each of the picture-cards, functioned as help or "scaffolding" for children.

When I observed this activity in the classroom it was very successful and the student teacher subsequently presented the activity in the meeting when we had the entire network together. Most student teachers were impressed and asked for information so they could prepare something similar. Some of them even asked me to go outside the schedule, and above and

beyond the program of scheduled visits, to observe a lesson when they implemented this activity.

The network seemed to improve the abilities of student teachers, not only as future teachers but also as individuals who can bring about change in the schools where they will work in the future. In addition, the network seemed to create the potential for continuous improvement on issues of intercultural education. In many instances, our student teachers transferred the ideas they learned in the collaborative network to the teachers of the schools where they did their practical training. Even most of these teachers did not have particular knowledge on issues of intercultural education and the initiative of our student teachers spilled over to involve the teachers as well.

Some schools, after the initiative of our student teachers, organized and implemented various projects on themes related to intercultural education (e.g. races of the world, different countries, human rights). In these projects student teachers had a leading role. From talking to teachers after the end of these projects it seemed that our student teachers had influenced them. The teachers declared that the projects were successful and that they would try to re-implement those and similar projects in the future.

### **Dialogue, inquiry and reflection**

The organization of our student teachers into collaborative networks and the effort to create a community of practice, as I have already said, seemed to help in the development of intercultural practices. Analyzing this fact in greater depth, it seemed that each one of our team in turn, had a positive impact on the student teachers involved for the improvement of their practice regarding intercultural education.

The collaboration and dialogue that was developed within the collaborative networks seemed to help student teachers at different levels. In some cases, it helped them to not only express their disappointment for the progress of their work, but also to share with their student colleagues and teachers their achievements. In addition, this collaboration helped them to ask for help in planning some of their lessons, the way they would execute them, and the materials they would use in their teaching. Student teachers were also encouraged by the network to exchange materials and lesson plans related to intercultural education.

The examples we have seen are characteristic of the general positive situation. Working in couples and observing each other's practice and the accompanying dialogue seemed to 'generate knowledge' and this was noticed by student teachers in the critical reflections they wrote. For example, a student teacher wrote:

The collaboration I had with my student colleague helped both of us to see other dimensions of planning our teaching and the way of presenting the content of the lesson.

And a second one wrote the following:

The questions that my student colleague asked helped me to think some ideas that everybody liked when I presented them ... Observing the lesson of my student colleague and trying to spot points for discussion encouraged and helped me to reflect on my own practice and find ways for improvement.

The involvement of collaborative networks in this project seems to help student teachers to alter the views on the pedagogy they had until then. The student teachers began to appreciate more the value of investigating their practice for the purpose of improvement, and the better activities that emerged through inquiry, as well as the incorporation of intercultural practices.

The comments the student teachers made during the meetings showed their positive attitude towards investigating practice, and the utilization of effective reflection. Furthermore, many student teachers declared that as teachers in future they would integrate into their activities similar practices and that they would try to develop more collaborations for the purpose of achieving higher quality and more effective intercultural education.

The fact that the subject matter at first was almost unknown to some student teachers created initial feelings of insecurity in them, and they hesitated to get involved in the development and implementation of intercultural practices. Their participation in the collaborative network, though, facilitated a more positive learning situation because student teachers were engaged in a dialogue with their student colleagues and educators. These circumstances provided them with help and support whenever needed.

However, help and support were not in a form of ready-made solutions, but student teachers were directed and challenged to investigate their practice, and reflect for the purpose of finding alternative practices that would cultivate effective intercultural practices. A student teacher wrote in her portfolio:

The exchange of views with my student colleagues and teachers gave me ideas and challenged me to think differently, to create my own ideas and to rethink the ways I had taught until then.

In addition, one of the authors wrote in his diary after a meeting with the entire team:

It seems that the dialogue generated during these discussions challenges student teachers to reflect on their practices, to investigate their ways of working with emphasis on intercultural education and to create new alternative practices and ways of working. Moreover, the collaboration they have among themselves, in the groups of two or four, seems to produce a dialogue at a different, and perhaps, more personal level, and to further encourage inquiry and reflection. All together the circumstances seem to function for the development of intercultural practices.

Jennings & Smith (2002) reach a similar finding. They studied ways of teacher education on issues of intercultural education and reach the conclusion that intercultural practices are better cultivated through critical inquiry, collaboration and dialogue.

### **Dialogue, theory and practice**

Throughout the collaborative network the student teachers were organized in a community of practice where a dialogue among all involved was developed, and as a result, theory was put into practice. Despite the fact that our student teachers were not fully trained in the theory of intercultural education and what they knew was knowledge gained from a series of ‘irrelevant’ lecture lessons on intercultural education, it seemed that through the dialogue developed in the collaborative network they managed to put theory into practice.

The data that I collected, throughout the project, during observations of student teachers’ lessons, suggests that our student teachers value and respect their pupils. They also developed abilities of having a dialogue with children, and also abilities for directing group discussions in the classroom on controversial issues, such as race, language, colour, and ethnic difference. I was also excited to see in various instances student teachers became aware that they had actually put theory into practice as the following student teacher wrote:

The discussion in groups, the exchange of ideas, the help of our educators were catalytic in managing to apply in practice what I knew in theory ... I knew different things but I knew them in theory. Little by little and by developing a dialogue with

my student colleagues and my educators I cleared up in my mind certain things and as a result I put them in practice.

The comments of our student teachers, that I collected, either orally or in writing, in their portfolios, as well as my own observations converged towards three characteristics that were developed through the collaborative network.

First, it was the collaborative work between student teachers, second, the dialogue that was developed in the team, and third, the systematic investigation of existing practices for the purpose of developing new more effective or more successful.

These three points can actually be summed up in an Ainscow (1999) quote, that in collaborative inquiry theory and practice 'confront and question one another in an on-going dialogue' (p. 39). The following student teacher's comments are characteristic for this issue:

Before getting involved in this collaborative network what I knew about intercultural education was mainly in theory ... in practice I didn't do much ... I didn't know how ... I was alone ... In contrast, the collaboration throughout the network and developed dialogue challenged me ... and when I had to criticize the practice of a colleague I recalled all the theoretical knowledge I had, however much that was, in order to be able to contribute to the discussion and to present suggestions for better practice.

Another student teacher pays more attention to the dialogue between theory and practice:

Actually when I wrote the self-reflection of my lesson or the criticism for my students colleague's lesson I observed that I was all the time switching between theory and practice and many times I had the dilemma of whether what I did or saw was right in theory ... and how something I knew in theory would look in practice.

I will conclude this section with a relevant story taken from Ainscow (1999). There is a story, Ainscow recounts, of a famous professor who although he wrote a number of significant papers on education had not visited a school for over twenty years. A young colleague persuaded him to visit a neighbouring school that had a good reputation. On the way back, the young lecturer asked the professor to comment on what he had seen, and after some thought he said: 'I'm just thinking, would it work in theory?'

### **Final comments**

In this paper I have tried to cultivate intercultural practices in undergraduate student pre-primary teachers by building a networked community of practice. After I discovered that the student teachers of the School of Education at Intercollege had shortcomings in issues of intercultural education, and based on the relevant literature that deals with teacher education and intercultural education (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1995; Sleeter, 1992), I implemented this project, which at the end seemed to have very promising outcomes. Despite the fact that the network I built had only twenty student teachers, the collaboration and dialogue on matters of practice, and for developing intercultural practices in particular, seem to have good results for student teachers.

In the collaborative network where dialogue and exchange of ideas develop, the practice of student teachers on issues of cultural diversity, symbiosis of different cultures and human rights can be more easily developed. The networked communities of practice can gradually become networked communities of learning where student teachers will develop processes of learning, and learn how to learn for life long education. And of course, the network can easily expand by involving other students and educators, something that will create communities of learning on a wider basis within a university.

Effective teacher education on intercultural issues is difficult to achieve without the involvement of student teachers in practical training. In practical training student teachers should get involved in inquiry, critical commentary, dialogue and reflection. These can be more easily achieved by building networked communities of practice. The different participants have different experiences, values, beliefs and style of teaching, but by collaborating they learn to 'live and learn' from different people. The organization and function of such communities can gradually create intercultural cultures within the universities, and this can facilitate, I believe, the development of intercultural practices.

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